

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHVB #0432/01 1960924
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 150924Z JUL 09
FM AMEMBASSY ZAGREB
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9396
INFO RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L ZAGREB 000432

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/01/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [HR](#)
SUBJECT: SDP SELECTS PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE; SEEKING ALLIES

REF: A. ZAGREB 402
[1](#)B. ZAGREB 407
[1](#)C. ZAGREB 413

Classified By: Rick Holtzapple, Pol/Econ, Reasons 1.4 B/D

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In the first ever party primary in Croatia, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) on July 12 chose law professor Ivo Josipovic as the party's presidential candidate for elections to be held in late December 2009 or early January 2010. The formal Josipovic campaign will probably begin slowly, but the SDP is already negotiating with other parties to support Josipovic, and to join SDP as potential coalition partners for early parliamentary elections, which the SDP anticipates will be held in the spring of 2010. Josipovic's nomination represents a victory for SDP head Zoran Milanovic over his detractors within the party. Should Milanovic also succeed in forging strong cooperation with some of Croatia's smaller parties in the coming six months, the SDP should be well positioned for the presidential race as well as potential early parliamentary elections. END SUMMARY.

SDP PRIMARY CHOOSES PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE...

[1](#)2. (U) In an unprecedented move, the SDP executive committee determined in mid-June to hold an internal vote of all SDP members in order to choose the party's nominee for the upcoming election to replace current President Stipe Mesic. (NOTE: The Croatian Constitution stipulates that presidential elections have to be held between 60 and 30 days before the incumbent President's mandate expires, which dictates that the next presidential election will occur between mid-December 2009 and mid-January 2010. END NOTE.) On July 12, nearly 20,000 of the roughly 34,000 registered SDP members went to local branch offices to choose between two current SDP members of parliament: academic and legal expert Ivo Josipovic, and well-known economist Ljubo Jurcic. Josipovic, the clear personal favorite of Milanovic, received 61 percent of the vote and pledged that his campaign would focus on enhancing the rule of law and democracy, a theme which he called a "new justness" for all Croatians.

...AND REACHES OUT TO OTHER PARTIES

[1](#)3. (SBU) In the aftermath of PM Ivo Sanader's surprise resignation and the formation a new government led by Jadranka Kosor (reftels), the SDP has been increasing its contacts with several smaller parties in parliament, with an eye toward early parliamentary elections. Secretary General of the SDP, Igor Dragovan, told PolOff on July 13 that the SDP expects the Kosor government will falter in the face of the crumbling economy and ongoing corruption scandals, and the SDP is expecting new elections will likely be held in spring 2010. Therefore, the SDP is carefully considering an "informal" proposal from fellow-opposition party the Croatian Peoples' Party (HNS), in which the HNS would support Josipovic for president and the SDP and HNS would run a combined list for the next parliamentary elections. Despite

HNS suggestions on the positions it would like in a future SDP-HNS government, Dragovan noted that it was way too early to speak about the actual division of governmental positions.

The SDP felt such a discussion would come across as arrogant and prompt a public backlash if the SDP presupposed electoral victory. Also, Dragovan said he was aware that not all HNS members liked the idea of backing Josipovic -- particularly since HNS president Radimir Cacic has his own presidential ambitions -- in exchange for future cooperation in an as yet unscheduled parliamentary election. Still, he said the SDP and HNS were talking strategically.

14. (C) The SDP is also actively courting its longtime regional partner, the Istrian Democratic Party (IDS), for its eventual support of Josipovic. IDS representative Damir Kajin has stated the party is not inclined to back Josipovic, at least in the first round, as Kajin is planning to run for president as well. Dragovan, however, expects that the IDS would support Josipovic in a second round run-off. Lastly, sensing the Kosor-led coalition government is not on as firm a ground as it was under Sanader, the SDP has reached out to the Croatian Peasants' Party (HSS), the second largest party in the HDZ's ruling coalition. Milanovic recently probed HSS chief Josip Friscic's feelings about continuing to support Kosor as prime minister, and hinted at the possibility of cooperation in the future between the HSS and SDP. Despite this effort, Milanovic's relationship with Friscic remains icy and the SDP is aware the HSS would likely table significant demands in exchange for a supporting a future SDP-led government. Still, several HSS members of parliament are disgruntled with Friscic's leadership and feel their constituencies naturally favor the SDP over Kosor's Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ).

JOSIPOVIC CANDIDACY STRENGTHENS MILANOVIC'S HAND

15. (SBU) Milanovic has been under fire from several factions of the SDP in recent months, but he seems to be finding his footing as the economic crisis continues and the Kosor government begins to struggle with the need to pass unpopular budget cuts. The high turnout and the party-base's embrace of Josipovic is a clear boost to Milanovic's grip on the party. It may also silence critics who felt that Milanovic's exclusion of other potential SDP candidates from the primary ballot was a mistake. Milanovic now has nearly six months to get the party machinery ready for the presidential election, further tailor the party's message, and forge alliances with some smaller parties. Josipovic, for his part, may need a little time to get comfortable on the national stage and refine his style; during an early July "primary" debate on Nova TV Josipovic appeared a bit more nervous than Jurcic and can, at times, come across as distant, professorial, and aloof. The latest public opinion poll by Promcija Plus conducted in early July put Josipovic in second place (2 points behind Sanader) with about 14 percent support nationally, an increase of roughly 5 points from previous polls.

BIOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

16. (U) Dr Ivo Josipovic was born in Zagreb in 1957. He graduated in 1980 from the University of Zagreb, School of Law and passed the bar examination in 1982. He completed his Master's Degree in Criminal Law in 1984 and his Ph.D. in Criminal Law with a doctoral thesis on pre-trial detention in 1995. Since 1995, he has been a Professor of Criminal Procedure and International Criminal Law at the University of Zagreb as well as regularly lecturing at the Police Academy and Diplomatic Academy. Josipovic is also a musician and composer, and he has a degree from the Zagreb Academy of Music. He was first elected to the Croatian parliament (Sabor) in 2003, as an SDP candidate, although he only formally joined the SDP in 2008. He chairs the SDP's council on Human Rights and Civil Society. In the Sabor, he sits on the Legislation and the Judiciary Committees. He is married. He speaks good English, but prefers to speak in Croatian with visitors. In February 2002, he participated in an Embassy-sponsored International Visitor Program trip on

foreign policy and human rights.

COMMENT

17. (C) The novelty of an open party primary, and the generally good reputation of Josipovic, have produced a few days of positive press coverage for the SDP and Milanovic. The almost certain absence of Sanader in the upcoming presidential race, and the likelihood that the relatively unpopular Andrija Hebrang will be the HDZ's candidate for president, combine to strengthen the chances that the SDP's voter-base will put Josipovic in a second round run-off, possibly against an independent, populist candidate. Wild cards in this presidential race are numerous, however. A large number of candidates are likely to run -- we expect around 10 or so -- and one of them may be the SDP's own populist mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandic, who has little affection for Milanovic. Also, President Mesic, who is very popular with the SDP's left-leaning voters, is likely to informally endorse a candidate in the waning days of 2009. Mesic has commented that Josipovic won the right to campaign for the presidency in a very democratic way, but he has been generally very tight-lipped about whom he might eventually favor. Another key will be the SDP's outreach to other parties. Such negotiations represent a challenge for the sometimes prickly Milanovic, but, if successful, would bode well for Josipovic's prospects, as well as the SDP's chances should early parliamentary elections materialize in the first half of 2010. END COMMENT.
BRADTKE